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Pakistan and the New Ethos of Muslim Middle Class

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Revolutions confuse and confound even those who bring them about. They also puzzle those who watch them unfold from some distance. This is certainly the case with the rapid changes occurring in the Muslim world. The change is not only affecting the Middle East but also the Muslims in South Asia. And it is being brought about by the rise of the middle class. Economists have been studying for quite some time the role the middle class plays in shaping and reshaping economic systems and structures. It is now the right moment for other social scientists, in particular those who study politics, to catch up with them.

The current turmoil in the Muslim world has one important reason. In Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey, the rapidly growing and increasingly assertive middle class wants to have a say in the way political, economic and social systems work. Means of modern communication – in particular, the extensive use of social media – have made it possible for the middle class not only to find its voice but also to have that voice heard. In asserting themselves the members of the middle class are not following any political philosophy, not even any religious preference. Street chaos in Cairo within the space of thirty months is a good reflection of the political preferences of the middle class youth. They forced the long-surviving government headed by Hosni Mubarak to leave office since it was not meeting the needs of this segment of the population. Thirty months later, the street judgment about the

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substance of the rule by the elected Muslim Brotherhood administration was equally harsh. What the street wants is an inclusive political system. The street has also found a way of fighting the establishment which holds the reins of power but does not necessarily use it for the good of the heterogeneous middle class.

While Egypt has seen extreme swings in the pendulum, the Islamic-leaning government in Turkey has also met with considerable resistance. This occurred when it was felt that those who led it were inclined to define public policy in a very narrow sense. Istanbul's Taksim Square erupted in the summer of 2013 to push back the attempt by Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan to establish a political system that had a narrow social reach. The Turkish middle class youth found a cause to express its displeasure. They were not prepared to have one of the few open spaces left in the city to be used for celebrating the country's Islamic past. Erdogan wanted to construct a large mosque in the area; the youth wanted the area to remain untouched. Their preference was guided by modernity, that of the ruling establishment by nostalgia about the past. The past has lost relevance for most in the middle class. The conflict in Turkey as well as the one in Egypt will get resolved only when inclusive political systems are established that, by their very nature, will have to respect plurality and find a way of accommodating the many minorities.

The Turkish example reflects one other important aspect of activism by the middle class. While it appreciates economic progress it does not want it at the expense of constraints on political rights. In the middle class's thinking, political development takes precedence over economic advance. This line of thought was also advanced by a highly respected Turkish economist who teamed up with an American political scientist to publish in 2013 an important book titled *Why Nations Fail?* Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson put considerable emphasis on the importance of inclusive political development as a precursor for sustained economic growth. Many political systems in the emerging world, they argued, were narrow in their reach and exclusive in their preference and thus became unstable. Equilibrium requires inclusion in both politics and economics.

Pakistan is the 'Surprise' Good Example

One large Muslim country seems to be set on a course that would absorb the aspirations of the middle class youth while maintaining its Islamic identity. Pakistan will not be the example that will come to many minds as a country that may be able to set an example for the rest of the Muslim world to move forward and reach a state of equilibrium in politics as well as economics. The country's move in that direction was not easy. It has passed through periods of extreme political, economic and social turbulence. But as the election held in May 2013 and the conduct of the government it created show, the country may be set on a course to finally achieve political stability and thus prepare the ground for sustained economic growth.

What Pakistan and, to a somewhat limited extent, Turkey have achieved in the last few years is to push the military off the centre of the political stage. In the post-colonial period in the

Muslim world, it was the better organised military that filled the space that should have been occupied by civil political institutions. The creation of these institutions is a slow process. Repeated military interventions come in the way of orderly political development. This has happened in all large Muslim nations – Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan and Turkey. The rising middle class has begun to move these countries in another direction, and that is a testimony to the power it now wields.

The middle-class thinking, attitudes and aspirations don't stop at national borders. If there is anything universal about ideas it is those to which the middles classes are attached not in one country but all over the world. The middle class system of beliefs, knowing no physical borders, have produced what economists call “network externalities”. These come about when those who believe in something talk to those who believe in the same things. This way ideas spread and people cohere, especially now when it is so easy and almost costless to communicate. The spread of these ideas can only be resisted at a great cost. This is particularly the case in the realm of politics.

Take the case of Egypt. As the political order evolved after the middle class finally rebelled against authoritarian rule, the revolution that was the result was hijacked by another force that was equally intolerant of opposing views. Two years after Hosni Mubarak was dislodged the middle class rose again in even larger numbers than in January 2011. They wanted Mohammed Morsi, the president belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, to change his approach to governance; to make the system he was creating inclusive rather than exclusive favouring one point of view – the Islamic way. The military intervened and removed Morsi and a lot of blood was shed. The West watched but did little to prevent the old authoritarian system from returning. It was confused by the rapidly unfolding events. Had US President Barack Obama re-read the speech he gave in May 2011 he and his government would have reacted differently. “But the events of the past six months show that strategies of repression and strategies of division will not work anymore”, the American President had told his audience in the State Department. Talking about the rolling change in the Middle East, Obama had asserted “that we have a stake not just in the stability of nations, but in the self-determination of individuals. Then *status quo* is unsustainable. Our support of these principles is not a secondary interest. Today I want to make it clear that it is top priority that must be translated into concrete actions and supported by all the diplomatic, economic and strategic tools at our disposal”. The middle class understood these words and the sentiment that was behind them.

That power increased for several reasons, most important of these was demographic. Most large Muslim countries have very young populations with their median age in the middle to upper ‘twenties. The fact that more than one-half of the populations of these countries is below 25-30 years has helped to move forward their political development. The youth have also found the street and the public square as the places where they can congregate and express themselves. There cannot be any stepping back from where these countries have arrived at in terms of gaining political maturity. General Abdul al-Sisi's intervention in Egypt should be seen as a part of a process, not a reversal in the trend set in place by middle-class activism.

An Emerging South Asian Commonality

This is also the context in which South Asia's failure to create working regional economic structures need to be looked at. Economists recognise that there needs to be some commonality among the political systems before countries can work together in the field of economics. The Indian independence movement was led by the middle class. The movement for the creation of Pakistan was shepherded by the upper segments of the Muslim society. It is not surprising that once independence was achieved the two countries moved in different political directions. In Pakistan, as long as the middle class had not entered politics in some strength, issues such as the roles of the military and Islam remained central to the country's political discourse. This is now changing in the two Muslim countries to the west and east of India – Pakistan and Bangladesh respectively. In both the middle class is gaining political and economic strength. Conditions therefore are being created that will move all of South Asia in the same political direction. At long last South Asia may have some similarity in the way political systems are shaped. That will make it easier for the countries in the region to work together in the economic arena.

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